

CEO, OPEN ROAD FILMS

Tom Ortenberg

The *Spotlight* exec on Oscar campaign reform, those nine months with Harvey and why 'I am feeling the Bern'

By Pamela McClintock

TOM ORTENBERG HAS COME A LONG WAY from running Lionsgate's first Los Angeles office out of a cramped apartment in Santa Monica. It was the late 1990s, and he used his bedroom as an office, making phone calls as his newborn son slept in another room. Ortenberg, now 55, stayed at Lionsgate as it grew over the next decade, serving as president of its film division and helping win the studio its first best picture Oscar for *Crash* in 2006. Now, after a short stint with The Weinstein Co., he's running Open Road Films and he's back in the best picture hunt with *Spotlight*, the film exposing the Catholic Church abuse scandal that is nominated for six Oscars and had grossed \$37.4 million as of Feb. 17 in the U.S. Owned by Regal Cinemas and AMC Entertainment, two of the country's three largest theater chains, Open Road launched in 2011 and is charged with releasing seven to eight titles a year that are guaranteed Regal and AMC screens. The 44-employee company has experienced highs (Jon Favreau's *Chef*) and lows (Sundance hit *Dope*, Jon Stewart's *Rosewater*) as it releases the kind of midbudget movies the big studios and tiny indies often neglect. The soft-spoken Ortenberg, a married father of three sons, sat down with *THR* in his Santa Monica office to discuss the scary state of the box office, his company's unique ownership and whether the government is monitoring Oliver Stone's September biopic *Snowden*.

How did you first become aware of *Spotlight*?

The script came to us from Participant Media. I was sitting in my chair in my family room and I read it very quickly in one sitting. I remember an overwhelming feeling rushing over me. I put it down and it took me a few moments to compose myself. And I thought: "This is why we are in this business. We have to do whatever we can to be involved with this project."

You're Jewish. Did you know anybody who was Catholic and had been abused?

No. I have many Catholic colleagues in the industry and some of my best friends growing up were Catholic. I like to see myself as somebody who cares about the disenfranchised and who cares about justice. I started



Ortenberg on the growing importance of Rotten Tomatoes: "I think there are a lot of moviegoers who can't tell you the name of a single critic but can tell you the exact Rotten Tomatoes score."

my own political party, the Consumer Party, when I was in college at Penn State with some friends and later ran for the state legislature in Pennsylvania when I was 23. I was arrested at the U.N. Special Session for Disarmament in front of the United Nations when I was in high school, and I was arrested at the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant in New Hampshire.

Are you supporting Bernie Sanders?

I am feeling the Bern and supporting him in the primary. I have maxed out on my donations to Bernie's campaign, and my wife hosts a phone bank every Tuesday at our house. I consider myself a progressive, and I just find myself agreeing with Bernie more on issues of inequality. I do feel like the rich should pay more in taxes, and I feel like there should be a higher minimum wage. Of course, I'm a great admirer of Hillary Clinton, and I wouldn't shy away from supporting her as the Democratic nominee.

Do you think more people in Hollywood are supporting Bernie now?

I would think so.

Sanders is an advocate for campaign finance reform. Do you think there needs to be awards campaign reform?

That's hilarious. I do believe there needs to be reform. I'd like to start a small group that can make recommendations to the Academy. Personally, I would favor the Academy acting as a clearinghouse for mailings. Every studio [should] do an email every year to each voting member asking which materials they would like to receive and how. It's very costly and this would save companies hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The #OscarsSoWhite controversy has put a laser focus on diversity. You helped Halle Berry become the first black best actress winner for *Monster's Ball*. Did she doubt she could win because of the color of her skin? Race never entered into the conversation, quite honestly. But early on, even before the movie opened, I sat down with Halle and her manager at lunch and told her that if *Monster's Ball* broke out of the art house, we could get



"I had two passions — political activism and movies. I knew that I would make one my career and one my hobby," says Ortenberg, photographed Feb. 10 at his office in Santa Monica.

nominated. I presented her with various statistics, save a couple of exceptions, showing that no actresses who had won in the past 20 or 30 years had a film that grossed less than \$10 million. Therefore, it was incumbent on Halle and all of us at Lionsgate to work as hard as possible in the promotion of the film. She was amazing. She understood we didn't have unlimited deep pockets, so instead of asking us to send cars and things like that, she often drove herself to events and did her own hair and makeup.

Crash pulled off one of the biggest upsets in Oscar history when it won best picture over *Brokeback Mountain*, and many credit Lionsgate for being the first studio to send screeners to all 100,000-plus members of SAG.

We briefly wondered if it would be cost prohibitive, so we ran those numbers and it turned out to be much cheaper than we imagined to send them out in plain vanilla envelopes. It was about \$225,000, which is a lot of money, but when you talk about the amount of money that studios spend on these awards campaigns, it wasn't an overwhelming amount. And now, of course, almost everybody does it once you get the SAG nomination.

We've seen a number of movies open wide to \$5 million or less this year. You had *Rock the Kasbah*, starring Bill Murray, which opened to a dismal \$1.5 million in October.

The marginal films get further marginalized. Hence, there is no floor at the box office anymore. And so certainly for *Rock the Kasbah* and even *Fifty Shades of Black* — I'm not going to throw stones at others without swallowing a little crow ourselves — there was no floor. There are just too many other choices and too many distractions, and it's too difficult to get your message out.

You joined The Weinstein Co. in 2009 but only lasted nine months. What happened?

I found Harvey to be very generous. It just wasn't a good match of personalities between Harvey and Bob and myself.

Do you have to get approval from your bosses at Regal and AMC when you want to buy a film?

We operate like most other companies operate in that, as the CEO, I have somewhat broad authority and autonomy to operate the company in the manner I best see fit.

So if you're in a festival and you're bidding on a movie, what do you do?

Whether I have to or not, I always keep them up to date on everything. Obviously, if there's a script that we're thinking about buying, or we are thinking about joining forces with somebody, I've got more time to engage the board. If it's

1 A poster of Oscar winner *Crash* signed by director Paul Haggis and most of the cast, including Sandra Bullock and Terrence Howard.
2 Ortenberg's most recent addition to his collection of music and sports memorabilia is a *Hotel California* album signed by the original members of the Eagles.
3 A hockey stick signed by the L.A. Kings.
4 A football helmet autographed by Penn State and NFL running back Franco Harris.



a competitive festival situation and I don't have much time, I still shoot off an email or make a phone call just to let people know.

According to SEC filings, AMC has invested \$10 million in Open Road and is carrying a loss beyond that of \$2 million, while Regal has invested \$20 million and is reporting a loss of \$7.5 million.

I am not allowed to talk about any of the specifics. All I can tell you is that they have lived up to their obligations. And if there are losses, it's important to understand that movies have very long tails. A loss in year one is not necessarily

a loss in year five, seven or 10. There hasn't been any need for them to invest more money. We've never asked them for more money.

How much are you willing to spend on a movie?

I can certainly tell you that we have never paid anywhere close to \$10 million for the domestic rights to a picture, or rather the domestic equity gap.

How would you describe Open Road's performance overall?

I'm happy to report we've had more winners than losers overall. The theatrical marketplace is a roller coaster. And anybody who wants to play in it has to be prepared for that fact. It's not a probability.

You have another hot-button movie, *Snowden*, Oliver Stone's biopic of Edward Snowden.

Has the government contacted you?

No one at Open Road has been contacted, but I believe they're paying attention.

Are you in touch with Snowden?

I have never spoken to him or corresponded with him. I don't know how to reach him. But the movie is terrific. I think it's electrifying. The thing that will surprise people is that it is also an epic love story.

The Fifth Estate, about Julian Assange, bombed. Doesn't this concern you?

I don't think Julian Assange is Edward Snowden. **THR**

Open Road's Roller-Coaster Ride: Box-Office Highs and Lows



HIGHS

- 1. *The Nut Job* (2014)**
\$64.3 million
- 2. *The Grey* (2012)**
\$51.6 million
- 3. *End of Watch* (2012)**
\$41 million

LOWS

- 1. *The Fluffy Movie* (2014)** ▶
\$2.8 million
- 2. *Rock the Kasbah* (2015)**
\$3 million
- 3. *Rosewater* (2014)**
\$3.1 million

